



Ourson Part I: The Lark and the Toad

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French

Intermediate
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There was once a pretty woman named Agnella, who cultivated a farm. She lived alone with a young servant named Passerose. The farm was small but beautiful and in fine order. She had a most charming cow, which gave a quantity of milk, a cat to destroy the mice and an ass to carry her fruit, butter, vegetables, eggs, and cheese to markets every Wednesday.

No one knew up to that time how Agnella and Passerose had arrived at this unknown farm which received in the county the name of the Woodland Farm.

One evening Passerose was busy milking the pretty white cow while Agnella prepared the supper. At the moment she was placing some good soup and a plate of cream upon the table, she saw an enormous toad devouring with avidity some cherries which had been put on the ground in a vine-leaf.

“Ugly toad!” exclaimed Agnella, “I will teach you how to eat my cherries!” At the same moment she lifted the leaves which contained the cherries, and gave the toad a kick which dashed it off about ten steps. She was about to throw it from the door, when the toad uttered a sharp whistle and raised itself upon its hind legs; its

great eyes were flashing, and its enormous mouth opening and shutting with rage, its whole ugly body was trembling and from its quivering throat was heard a terrible bellowing.

Agnella paused in amazement; she recoiled, indeed, to avoid the venom of the monstrous and enraged toad. She looked around for a broom to eject this hideous monster, when the toad advanced towards her, made with its fore paws a gesture of authority, and said in a voice trembling with rage:—

“You have dared to touch me with your foot! You have prevented me from satisfying my appetite with the cherries which you had placed within my reach! You have tried to expel me from your house! My vengeance shall reach you and will fall upon that which you hold most dear! You shall know and feel that the fairy Furious is not to be insulted with impunity. You shall have a son, covered with coarse hair like a bear’s cub and——”

“Stop, sister,” interrupted a small voice, sweet and flute-like, which seemed to come from above. Agnella raised her head and saw a lark perched on the top of the front door. “You revenge yourself too cruelly for an injury inflicted, not upon you in your character of a fairy but upon the ugly and disgusting form in which it has pleased you to disguise yourself. By my power, which is superior to yours, I forbid you to exaggerate the evil which you have already done in your blind rage and which, alas! it is not in my power to undo. And you, poor mother,” she continued, turning to Agnella, “do not utterly despair; there is a possible remedy for the deformity of your child. I will accord to him the power of changing his skin with any one whom he may, by his goodness and service rendered, inspire with sufficient gratitude and affection to consent to the change. He will then resume the handsome form which would have been his if my sister, the fairy Furious, had not given you this terrible proof of her malice and cruelty.”

“Alas! madam Lark,” replied Agnella, “all this goodness cannot prevent my poor, unhappy son from being disgusting and like a wild beast. His very playmates will shun him as a monster.”

“That is true,” replied the fairy Drolette; “and the more so as it is forbidden to yourself or to Passerose to change skins with him. But I will neither abandon you nor your son. You will name him Ourson until the day when he can assume a name worthy of his birth and beauty. He must then be called the prince Marvellous.”

Saying these words, the fairy flew lightly through the air and disappeared from sight.

The fairy Furious withdrew, filled with rage, walking slowly and turning every instant to gaze at Agnella with a

menacing air. As she moved slowly along, she spat her venom from side to side and the grass, the plants and the bushes perished along her course. This was a venom so subtle that nothing could ever flourish on the spot again and the path is called to this day the Road of the Fairy Furious.

When Agnella found herself alone, she began to sob. Passerose, who had finished her work and saw the hour of supper approaching, entered the dining-room and with great surprise saw her mistress in tears.

“Dear queen, what is the matter? Who can have caused you this great grief? I have seen no one enter the house.”

“No one has entered, my dear, except those who enter everywhere. A wicked fairy under the form of a toad and a good fairy under the appearance of a lark.”

“And what have these fairies said to you, my queen, to make you weep so piteously? Has not the good fairy interfered to prevent the misfortunes which the wicked fairy wished to bring about?”

“No, my dear friend. She has somewhat lightened them but it was not in her power to set them aside altogether.”

Agnella then recounted all that had taken place and that she would have a son with a skin like a bear. At this narrative Passerose wept as bitterly as her mistress.

“What a misfortune!” she exclaimed. “What degradation and shame, that the heir of a great kingdom should be a bear! What will King Ferocious, your husband, say if he should ever discover us?”

“And how will he ever find us, Passerose? You know that after our flight we were swept away by a whirlwind and dashed from cloud to cloud for twelve hours with such astonishing rapidity that we found ourselves more than three thousand leagues from the kingdom of Ferocious. Besides, you know his wickedness. You know how bitterly he hates me since I prevented him from killing his brother Indolent and his sister Nonchalante. You know that I fled because he wished to kill me also. I have no reason to fear that he will pursue me for I am sure that he will wish never to see me again.”

Passerose, after having wept and sobbed some time with the Queen Aimee, for that was her true name, now entreated her mistress to be seated at the table.

“If we wept all night, dear queen, we could not prevent your son from being shaggy but we will endeavor to educate him so well, to make him so good, that he will not be a long time in finding some good and grateful soul who will exchange a white skin for this hairy one which the evil fairy Furious has put upon him. A beautiful present indeed! She would have done well to reserve it for herself.”

The poor queen, whom we will continue to call Agnella for fear of giving information to King Ferocious, rose slowly, dried her eyes and succeeded in somewhat overcoming her sadness. Little by little the gay and cheering conversation of Passerose dissipated her forebodings. Before the close of the evening, Passerose had convinced her that Ourson would not remain a long time a bear; that he would soon resume a form worthy of a noble prince. That she would herself indeed be most happy to exchange with him, if the fairy would permit it.

Agnella and Passerose now retired to their chambers and slept peacefully.

Note: The story continues in Ourson Part II: The Birth and Infancy of Ourson

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